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Justice Quashes Elaborate Plan To Corral Vesco

Federal investigators have gathered copious information linking fugitive financier Robert Vesco to multibillion-dollar drug-smuggling operations involving Cuban President Fidel Castro and Nicaraguan government officials. But the Justice Department quietly killed an elaborate plan to kidnap Vesco and bring him back to face criminal charges for which he was indicted more than 10 years ago.

Evidence I've uncovered indicates that the Reagan administration—like others before it—is afraid of what Vesco could disclose if he were to stand trial for his swindles. The elusive millionaire apparently knows too much about some well-known people in this country, both Republicans and Democrats.

My associates Corky Johnson and Jon Lee Anderson uncovered the intricate kidnap scheme that was secretly developed last summer and just as secretly squelched by Justice Department brass. The FBI's lips are sealed, but reliable sources say here's what happened and why:

FBI agents conducted several meetings last year with officials of the government of Costa Rica, where Vesco hid out for several years before taking refuge in Cuba. The first of the meetings was on July 29 in a hotel near the Miami airport. G-men from the Miami office discussed the proposed kidnaping with representatives of the Costa Rican vice president and officials of that country's national security agency.

The plan called for luring Vesco back into Costa Rica, where he owns a ranch, abducting him and turning him over to the FBI.

Coded telex messages from Miami to FBI headquarters in Washington outlined details of the plan. They indicated that the Costa Rican government was unofficially but enthusiastically behind it.

What would the Costa Rican government get for its cooperation? Reportedly several million dollars to be passed on to anti-Sandinista rebels whose presence in Costa Rica had become an embarrassment. The money presumably would have enabled the Nicaraguan guerrillas to carry their operations deeper inland into Nicaragua, away from the Costa Rican border.

When asked by my associate about the Vesco kidnap money, Eden Pastora, the designated rebel recipient, only chuckled and said he welcomed any donation to his cause.

The kidnapers—who would not have been FBI agents—had lined up a helicopter and boats equipped with radios to communicate over special frequencies with the FBI.

But the Justice Department killed the plan. The conspirators were told by an FBI agent that the plot was aborted because any money funneled to Nicaraguan rebels had to be approved by the CIA and the spy agency was not interested in bringing Vesco to book.

Further evidence of official U.S. reluctance is the report that the chief of Costa Rica's internal security refused to attend one meeting with the FBI, saying he knew the United States wasn't really interested in capturing Vesco. This squares with earlier information from Costa Rican police officials.

Why wasn't the CIA interested? Costa Rican officials and friends of Vesco said he has told them he has had ongoing contact with the CIA and its director, William J. Casey. Vesco reportedly brags that he even met Casey recently, and that Casey has helped him invest in the stock market.

Vesco has a habit of blowing hot air, but his associates say he was delighted when Casey was named head of the CIA.

Footnote: CIA general counsel Stanley Sporkin, who worked with Casey at the Securities and Exchange Commission, said that Vesco's claims about Casey are "complete nonsense." Not even "10 percent of what Vesco says" can be believed, Sporkin said. He also denied that the CIA maintains contacts with Vesco.

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